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ABSTRACT

Part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help children become readers, this booklet focuses on how to encourage high school students to read. The booklet describes the social needs of teenagers, general guidelines for developing purposeful reading, and specific strategies to develop purposes for reading. Under each of the different purposes some suggested activities to motivate teenagers to read are provided. A list of 10 recommended books and articles and a list of resources available from the International Reading Association are appended. (MS)

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# You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read

Jamie Myers

## About This Series

This booklet is part of a series designed to provide practical ideas parents can use to help their children become readers. Many of the booklets are being copublished by IRA and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills.

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# You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read

Have you ever heard your teenager say, "I just don't have time to read." Or maybe your son or daughter says, "After practice and homework, the last thing I want to do is to pick up another book!" From junior high to senior high graduation day, the amount of time many teens find for personal reading decreases.

Even when the situation is not so discouraging, as parents we want to know what we can do to encourage our children to read more because we know reading is an important way to learn in our information rich society. Also, most of us like to read, and we'd like our teenagers to discover the joy of reading, too.

There are many reasons why teens read less in high school. Common sense tells us that teens, like adults, choose to do things that meet their needs. They will choose to read more if we can show them how reading can serve their current needs, and maybe we can suggest some new needs for them that reading can fulfill.

# What Are the Needs of Teenagers?

Teenagers want to be socially accepted and successful, and both of these needs are closely related to forming a sense of identity. We parents can recognize these needs because they carry into adulthood. Many teenagers admit that they go to school to see their friends, that after-school activities provide important time for them to be with their friends, and that they also are eager to do things with their friends on the weekends.

In all of these social situations, teenagers develop a self-identity from the responses they get from their friends. Reading usually does not play much of a role in these social events, so many teens do not see themselves as readers. In fact, in some teenage social groups, those who do read a lot are laughed at.

Some teenagers, however, need privacy. They back away from social activities, may be less sure of their identity, do not want to work, or sometimes seem to lack a desire to succeed at anything. Some teens in this category are avid readers, perhaps because they seek to escape social pressures. But most of them find other ways to fill their time. Reading can supply information to help them build the confidence and self-regard they may need to become more outgoing and communicative with friends.

Many teenagers are under great pressure to succeed. Parents encourage them to work hard at school to prepare for a better future. Schools are accountable to taxpayers to train successful graduates, so teachers have raised their demands, assigning more difficult homework and more reading. High grades for post high school education and competitive job markets have become more important in teenagers' thinking. Because of these demands, teens spend a lot of time working on school tasks. Therefore, after school assignments are done, there is less time for personal reading, and nonreading activities may provide a more relaxing break.

We also must remember that teenagers are living in a world in which the importance of material things has in-

Reading for fun is a luxury for many busy teens.

creased. This drives teens to get after-school jobs. As parents, we are often pleased to see them accept this kind of responsibility, get work experience, and earn their own money. But we also must realize that their jobs may leave even less time for school and personal reading.

# General Guidelines for Developing Purposeful Reading

Here are three general guidelines that can increase the odds of success with the suggestions in this booklet.

**Telling teenagers they ought to do something for their own good, no matter how many reasons we list, is not usually the best tactic.** Common sense tells us that we read for certain purposes that meet our needs. We don't read just to be reading, but we often suggest exactly that when we say, "You ought to read more."

We need to demonstrate, in as natural a way as possible, how reading serves our own needs. Teens will learn about reading if we can involve them in our reading. We can express our opinion in connection with some magazine article. We can talk about newspaper ads that describe things we are thinking about buying. We can comment on interesting things we have read.

Some families have a daily time (such as during or after dinner) when this kind of conversation could happen. If you can get such a conversation going, your teen may want to look at the magazine or newspaper when you set it down. Even if that doesn't happen, you have at least demonstrated how reading has informed you and given you something to talk and think about.

If talking about reading is not common in your family, it may be hard the first few times, but don't give up. You won't get a great conversation going every time, either. Don't force participation.

**Teenagers often equate reading only with thick books full of hard words.** Yet reading involves a vast array of different materials. The personal reading we want our teens to develop need not involve only books.

**Ready access to different reading materials is important.** Your local library is almost certain to have the richest collection of free materials around, but pressuring

your teenager into going to the library may not be a good idea.

Remember that a teenager who becomes an avid reader will become an adult who invests in newspapers, magazines, manuals, and books of many kinds. Therefore, you may want to demonstrate that reading is a good investment of your own money and purchase different materials to have at home.

## Specific Strategies to Develop Purposes for Reading

The following discussion gives some possible purposes for reading that may meet social and personal needs of your teenager. After each purpose are some suggested activities to get your teenager interested in reading.

Reading leads to more knowledge about career choices and helps secure a better future. Most high school guidance departments give interest surveys to all students. You might call and request that the results from your youngster's survey be mailed to you. Sometimes, your teen will share only the one future occupation being considered at the moment. From the school survey, you can discover more occupations and careers marked by your teen as interesting.

Make a list of your teen's interests, combined with one or two careers you once dreamed of pursuing, and start gathering materials on them. Depending on the rapport you have with your teen, this could be a joint project, or you could just place the materials in obvious spots around the house.

In either case, a few phone calls and a library visit might get you started. First, call the school guidance counselor again and ask where you could get some materials about the careers on your list. Second, if you know persons

in the occupations on your list, ask them for some of the materials they often read. Or use the Yellow Pages of the telephone book to call persons in different occupations. Ask them about magazines or professional publications concerning their occupation.

Begin reading these materials and initiating discussions about one or more occupations. For example, say, "Did you see this article about what a designer does?" As your teenager develops an interest in several professions, you might help him or her set up a chart listing different careers and important factors in choosing one—such as salary, work hours, benefits, and location of work.

**College bound students need to plan and shop for a school.** If your teenager is planning on a college education or other special training after finishing high school, you have an excellent opportunity to promote reading. If the school hasn't yet been selected, you or your teen should write or call several campuses and ask for all the materials available about the schools and communities.

You might want to help set up a chart listing the different colleges down the side with the key factors important to making a decision across the top. Make the chart big enough to put notes in each box based on the ideas your teen gets from the brochures collected. The freshman and sophomore years in high school are not too early to begin such an activity.

**Reading provides enjoyment and relaxation.** This purpose for reading requires some changes in your reading habits. Currently, your teenager may never see you read for enjoyment. You may do that kind of reading during the day or at night before going to sleep. Probably the single most important thing you can do to demonstrate that reading is enjoyable is to read where and when you can share it with others. Over time, reading will relate to sharing ideas, and ideally, your teenager will begin to participate in "family reading time."

During family reading time, newspapers, magazines, books, catalogs, brochures, or letters can be read and shared in part. Don't make reading time a silent time. You

Parents and teens can share special interests through reading.

should read short bits aloud to others and share reactions. You may laugh aloud and then share the funny part. You may say, "This is unbelievable; listen to this...."

Digging up materials for your own reading enjoyment might not be a problem, but finding materials that will provide enjoyment to teens will require you to think like a teen. Notice the subjects of the television shows, movies, or videotapes your teen watches. Think about his or her favorite activities, sports, hobbies, and other special interests. Then, the next time you run across a display of books or magazines, buy a few that seem to be about similar subjects and scatter them about the house.

If your family goes to the library, help your teen locate materials about subjects of interest to him or her. Ask the librarian for help finding books about specific topics. Find a book and give it to your youngster, saying, "This sounds a lot like that show about...." Don't be irritated if your teenager lays it down sooner than you had hoped; your next effort may be more successful.

Reading helps you think through personal problems. Several years ago, reading specialists and some counselors were excited about the potential of fiction and biographies to help young people work through life's problems. It does make sense that a youngster who is worried about death, divorce, or broken friendships may find comfort in reading about fictional characters who face similar concerns. Many youngsters who have faced adversity have found inspiration in biographies about real people who have overcome their problems. A youth reading with such a purpose often wants to talk about it and should find us, as parents, ready to listen and understand.

Reading is an excellent way to learn how to do something. Often we have projects around the house that cannot be attempted without detailed directions. You can promote reading by supplying the directions a teenager needs to make or do something that would be difficult or impossible otherwise. Ideally, you can identify a project that both you and your teenager are interested in, like remodeling a bedroom or restoring an old car. Books and manuals on almost any project you and your teenager decide to begin are available from the library or building supply store.

Your teen should have responsibility from the beginning in deciding which books or directions are needed and in making a list of materials and steps to follow. Get your teenager involved in some price shopping with a list of materials to get an estimate of what the project will cost. You may need to look through catalogs for specific materials that will fit your budget and personalize the project. As you work on it, keep asking your teen to check the directions to see what is to be done next and how.

Reading introduces you to new activities that provide enjoyment. No matter how active your teenager already is, you always can be on the lookout for hobbies or activities that might become favorite pastimes for your youngster.

One way to learn about new activities is to spend fifteen minutes browsing through the magazine rack at the

Reading for information can help teens successfully complete special projects.

grocery or drug store. Just looking at the pictures and reading a line or two can get you thinking about something that might interest your teenager.

This browsing will be especially effective if your teen is with you. Talk about the activities as you browse. Or you might just look at the magazines of particular interest to you, while your teen looks through those of interest to him or her. If that works, notice which publications seem of interest to your youngster and offer to buy one.

Other places to find materials about specific activities are stores that sell supplies for special activities: hobby shops, music stores, sewing centers, or photography stores.

Many times, the newspaper provides important information about special events in the community, and some of these activities might be of special interest to your teen. Some newspapers provide a weekly or a weekend schedule of special and regular events of interest.

You can help develop the use of the newspaper for keeping current on such events by pointing out something you find interesting that you think your teen might like, too. This demonstration of using the newspaper for information suggests that it also may hold announcements of interest to teens. Lay the paper down open to the schedule of events and see if your teen picks it up.

**Reading helps you learn more about favorite pastimes or hobbies so you can deepen your enjoyment and appreciation of them.** You should subscribe to or borrow some specialty magazines related to activities in which you and your teen are involved. Libraries have complete listings of magazines and addresses for subscribing, as well as recent copies of many of the magazines for you to read. While you are getting the magazine or newspaper information, you also should investigate books and audiovisual resources.

Specialty magazines are full of advertisements about products used in hobbies and sports. Many of the companies that make such products offer free brochures or will send free information upon request.

Specialty publications also advertise how to join local, state, national, or international organizations of people

who are active in a particular pastime. Usually, these organizations charge a membership fee that covers the cost of a newsletter or magazine. Joining these organizations can open up many new sources of free information.

Books or other materials from the library often contain lists of books for additional reading. You could order these books from a local bookstore or ask your library to get them for you. Public libraries are set up to borrow books that they don't have from other libraries.

**Reading helps you find out about places to go and things to see.** Some families travel and take vacations. Trips provide great opportunities to gather reading materials about sights to see. Many automobile clubs and travel agencies have racks of informational brochures on vacation spots and attractions. Newspapers have travel sections. Again, the library is an excellent source of information. All these materials are fun to look at even if you aren't planning a vacation.

Books and magazines allow readers to explore fascinating places throughout the world.

If you are actually considering a vacation, involve your teen in comparing travel arrangements and costs to different destinations. A phone call to a travel agent can get you brochures and price lists for planes, buses, or trains. Other sources of material about possible vacation spots are Chambers of Commerce and state and federal agencies that promote travel. The library has addresses for government travel centers. You can request information about the area, its restaurants, hotels, businesses, and sightseeing attractions.

**Reading keeps you abreast of community, state, and world events and decisions.** Reading and being informed is the source of a kind of power. Citizens who read about the issues in their communities have a better understanding of the impact of governmental decisions on their lives. That kind of awareness encourages them to get involved.

You can help your teen develop community concern by using the newspaper. A few minutes before dinner spent glancing at the local news or the letters to the editor can provide ideas and details for some interesting dinnertime discussions. Look for topics in which your teenager might become involved, such as news about school or trends and issues of particular interest to youths.

Various weekly or monthly publications also cover state and national news. You can hand your teen the paper or magazine opened to a particular article and say, "Did you see this about...?" or "Yesterday, you talked about.... Well, take a look at what it says here."

Your teen also might enjoy comparing reports on an event or issue from different magazines and newspapers. You could point out different perspectives and ask, "Which do you agree with?"

Getting teens to think about the events around them, even if they do not read a whole article in detail, helps them develop that important community concern that will carry over into adulthood and result in a reader who participates in the democratic process.

**Reading helps you develop your own opinions about current issues and events.** As parents, we realize that teens often object to being told what to think about something. Arguments over opinions are not always healthy for the teen, who does not have as much worldly experience as the parents. Therefore, encouraging your teen to use newspapers and magazines to develop opinions about issues requires encouragement and listening rather than finding fault.

You don't always have to agree, and you may want to present some alternative perspectives based on something you have read, but be sure to show that you value your teen's opinion. Show that you are listening by asking your son or daughter to expand upon or clarify a point. And be patient; we so seldom ask our teens for their opinions that they might be reluctant to speak at first.

One way to get teenagers to share their opinions is to hand them an article and ask, "What do you think of this?" Another way is to describe a problem or disagreement that raises questions or invites interpretation. You may be reporting on something that happened or was said at work, on television, or at some community event.

When you have a few minutes with your teen, mention the incident and ask for an opinion. Then follow up with a statement about not being too sure what to think about it yourself. You might suggest that you feel the need to look up some information about the issue before you form an opinion. By doing this, you show your teen that adults often need to seek information to make thoughtful decisions about issues facing us in our society.

Your youngster soon may become an expert (or at least a reliable source of information) on particular topics. Once your teenager notices that friends and adults listen more carefully to what she or he says about these topics, the recognition that reading is important will be reinforced.

Through discussions, you can accelerate this awareness of the importance of reading by listening carefully when your youngster talks about areas of interest. Don't rush the expression of ideas; do ask questions to get more information. Being listened to and taken seriously is a gratifying experience to the teen seeking self-identity.

**Reading can help you answer intriguing questions.** Many times we do not show our teenagers how curious we are about the world around us. You may try asking questions about people or activities that interest them. A question in the morning about a sports, music, or television celebrity might give your teenager the incentive to search for information in the school library later that day. You might hold up an article and say, "Just how old is ...? Why does this writer think that kind of music speaks for a whole generation? Where did this person come from? I've never heard of him until now."

Once you get a discussion going, your teenager will begin asking you questions, too. Sometimes, it might be best to answer that you think such and such is the case, but that you aren't really sure. Ask if your youngster has read anything about certain issues and ask for suggestions of materials you could read.

**Reading can give you information to share with friends about common topics or concerns.** Most teenagers are very involved with what is happening around them in school. If your teen is in athletics, for example, the local newspaper is a good source of information about both your teen's school teams and their opponents. Keeping up with the other teams can give you information for discussion.

Other good sources of information about sports are coaching magazines and high school athletic magazines published in each state. You can get the address of these publications from your teen's coach or from the school's athletic department. There are also nationally distributed sports magazines, and your teen's coach might know of some good books about individual sports.

Clipping and organizing articles, photos, and mementos in scrapbooks can indirectly get your teen to read. A scrapbook doesn't have to be about a sport or a sports hero, though. It could be about music, automobiles, design, clothing, or any interest imaginable.

**Reading can help you investigate things that you hear about on television.** As parents, we hear a lot

about the negative impact of television on reading and writing. Yet, some recent studies suggest that certain television viewing may be associated with higher reading scores. This makes sense because television certainly provides information about current topics and issues that also are covered in readily available reading materials, including those used in schools.

The details presented in informational TV shows must be carefully selected because of time constraints, so they often serve to whet the appetite for more information. Many informational shows cite sources of additional information at the end of the broadcast, but most likely, you or your teen will have to seek them out. Your local library may have materials containing the information you want.

Entertainment shows can generate ideas, questions, and interests that merit seeking more information. The events may take place at a location that sparks interest and could lead to some reading. The actors may say something interesting, or the story may hinge upon a particular object or fact that could lead a teen to further reading.

There is a huge body of information about how television shows and movies are made. Filming techniques, special effects, and other aspects of production are the topics of countless books. Some of these may be of interest to your teen.

The most obvious connection between television and reading can be made by observing the types of shows your teen enjoys watching. Science, science fiction, romance, mystery, comedy, and cops and robbers books have been written for a teenage audience, so you can find books on topics similar to those on your youngster's favorite shows.

**Reading helps you deal with business transactions, and it can help you become a wiser consumer.** Reading and writing play a major role in our economic lives. Balancing the checkbook is a special kind of reading that all teens should learn. Most adults use the classified section of the newspaper to look for used items, jobs, garage sales, or new car prices. Teenagers can quickly learn to enjoy this daily treasure hunt, especially if they

find something they have wanted at a bargain price.

Magazines are full of special deals for special products that might fit one of your teenager's interests. How many catalogs have you received in the mail lately? Comparison shopping may take too much time, especially if you drive from store to store. Getting the family to read sales flyers and catalogs may save you time and money.

The temptation to quickly purchase products is often hard to avoid. But you can encourage your teen to compare brands and products by reading advertisements, warranties, and reports in consumer magazines. Consumer protection agencies have much material about product safety and durability that can be requested by telephone.

Books about shopping and making money are always popular at bookstores. Some of these materials may provide information helpful to your family situation, and your teenager could help choose books or magazines you both can read.

If your teenager works, one unavoidable responsibility is paying taxes. Encourage your child to do at least a draft of his or her tax returns. This might lead to the opportunity to share articles or books on taxes.

Some other important financial reading materials are insurance policies and loan papers. If you don't mind sharing your financial situation, you can offer your teenager a chance to look over your car loan or life insurance policy. Certainly, teenagers should be encouraged to read papers related to policies in their names and to cars they own.

# Beginning Purposeful Reading

As parents, we must remember that each teenager, each teen-parent relationship, and each family is unique. The ideas offered here are only possible beginning points for your situation. Perhaps these ideas will help you think of more specific approaches for your own family.

You might start by choosing just one purpose for reading that would best meet one or more of your teen's needs. After teenagers begin reading for their own purposes, you can encourage other reading purposes that you would like to see developed.

No matter where you begin to develop purposes for reading in your family, success depends upon patience and providing choices. Remember that attempts to pressure teens into attitudes we desire are often met with resistance. All attempts to promote reading are best introduced to teens in casual ways, where we participate with them in purposeful reading.

As you consider these and other suggestions for developing purposes for reading, you might realize how much writing some of the activities involve. Reading research has continually shown a strong relationship between writing, reading, and thinking. As we read for ideas and write to share them with others, we develop ways of thinking and talking about the world. Developing more purposes for reading will improve your teen's ability to write and talk—two important assets for future satisfaction and success.

Once you experience some success in promoting reading with your teenager, be careful not to lose it. Being too concerned with correctness in reading can cause just enough anxiety for a teen to avoid reading altogether. Reading something aloud to check accuracy should be avoided. But, reading aloud to enjoy the sound of language, as in a play or a song, or reading aloud to share the story, creates a positive, accepting atmosphere.

Discussion has been a frequent theme throughout this booklet. Disagreements with the author or with one another are actually desirable because they can lead to more

thinking and reading. If you have established an open atmosphere for talking about the ideas in reading materials of interest to your teen, yet your teen continually finds it difficult to think of anything to say, you might want to contact the school or a reading specialist to talk about how well your teen comprehends reading materials.

Although it may seem to make sense to connect reading with some reward, you should avoid this practice. It usually results in giving up reading once the reward can be achieved in another way. Likewise, having a punishment for not reading, such as no television or no activity with friends, should be avoided. This can build resentment toward reading.

It is important not to pressure teens to finish something they start reading. Many times we do not finish reading an article or a book, either.

Teenagers are striving to meet many needs as they begin their lives as adults. Their activities in school, within the family, and in society provide us with ample opportunities to promote reading as one convincing way to meet these needs. We need to demonstrate the many purposes for reading, writing, and thinking that will help our teens succeed and lead more satisfying lives.

Specialty publications provide information about hobbies and favorite pastimes.

## Further Reading and Research

The ideas in this booklet are based upon many research studies about reading and language development and upon the author's personal experience as a high school teacher. One important body of research suggests that reading is a purposeful activity, a collection of different practices that are used, like tools, to accomplish socially valued ends.

Another important body of research shows how literacy habits are connected to your community. Therefore, creating a sense of community, a sense of belonging to a social group that uses and talks about ideas found in written materials, is a first step in developing teen readers. The family can be that kind of community. The next section lists resources parents may find helpful.

# Recommended Reading for Parents

### Books

*Books That Made the Difference: What People Told Us.* Gordon Sabine and Patricia Sabine. Shoe String Press, Library Professional Publications, 1983.

*Helping Your Teenage Student. What Parents Can Do to Improve Reading and Study Skills.* Marion Cohn. New American Library, 1980.

*Kids Can Read Better.* Victoria Williams. New American Library, 1985.

### Journals

*The ALAN Review.* Reviews books for adolescents. Published three times yearly by the National Council of Teachers of English.

*The Booklist and Subscription Books Bulletin.* American Library Association. Reviews adult and juvenile books.

*Library Journal.* Published monthly September to May by R.R. Bowker. Reviews new books arranged by grade and subject categories.

### Lists

*Books for You: A Booklist for Senior High Students.* Robert Small, Jr. National Council of Teachers of English, 1982.

*Easy to Read Books for Teenagers: A Selected List.* Distributed annually by the Office of Young Adult Services, Mid Manhattan Library, 455 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10016.

*High Interest Easy Reading: For Junior and Senior High School Students.* Marian White. National Council of Teachers of English, 1979.

*Selecting Materials for Children and Young Adults: A Bibliography of Bibliographies and Review Sources.* American Library Association, 1980.

# Resources for Parents from IRA

## Books

*Comics to Classics: A Parent's Guide to Books for Teens and Preteens.* Arthea (Charlie) Reed. No. 798. US$8.95; IRA members, US$7.95.

*The Read Aloud Handbook,* revised edition. Jim Trelease. Published by Penguin Books and codistributed by IRA. No. 633. US$8.95; IRA members, US$8.25.

To order, send your check to: International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, PO Box 8139, Newark, DE 19714-8139, USA. Please specify both title and publication number when ordering.

## Parent Booklets

*Helping Your Child Become a Reader.* Nancy L. Roser. No. 161

*How Can I Prepare My Young Child for Reading?* Paula C. Grinnell. No. 163

*You Can Encourage Your High School Student to Read.* Jamie Myers. No. 162

*You Can Help Your Young Child with Writing.* Marcia Baghban. No. 160

Single copies of these parent booklets are available at a cost of US$1.75 each, prepaid only. Send your check to Parent Booklets at the address above. Please specify both title and publication number when ordering.

## Parent Brochures

IRA has available ten brochures covering a variety of topics pertaining to ways in which parents can help children of all ages become readers. To receive single copies of all ten brochures, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage for *three* ounces to Parent Brochures at the address above. The brochures are available in bulk quantities also, and ordering information appears in each brochure. (Requests from outside the USA should include a self-addressed envelope, but postage is not required.)

## Young Adults' Choices

Young Adults' Choices is a yearly list of books that young adults identify as their favorites. To receive a single copy, send a self-addressed envelope stamped with first class postage to Young Adults' Choices at the address above.

*The ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills (RCS) is one of sixteen nonprofit clearinghouses sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.*

*The International Reading Association is an 80,000 member nonprofit education organization devoted to the improvement of reading instruction and the promotion of the lifetime reading habit.*

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